

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Home

Labour of love

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Home

Making moves

House of the week

DEVON £3.75M

Grade II listed Trafalgar Barton occupies 20 acres of the East Devon National Landscape conservation area. The home was built by a Captain Yule — he served as lieutenant on HMS Victory in the Battle of Trafalgar — and has seven bedrooms and five bathrooms. The grounds include rose gardens, rockeries and a paddock. The nearest town is Sidmouth, six miles away. knightfrank.com



The best of this week's property for sale



NORTHUMBERLAND £395,000
Newly renovated four-bedroom Hott Cottage has views across Northumberland National Park. The home dates from the early 19th century, when it served as a post office. finestproperties.co.uk



SURREY £1.5M
Lake Cottage, six miles from Crawley, is a four-bedroom property with a heated outdoor swimming pool and floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the home's private fishing lake. savills.com



HERTFORDSHIRE £2.25M
This ten-bedroom house dates from the 1300s (legend has it Anne Boleyn once stayed here). It is in Little Wymondley, a village halfway between Hitchin and Stevenage. fineandcountry.com



FIFE 0/0 £350,000
A three-bedroom end-of-terrace house in Crail, a coastal village near St Andrews, with a south-facing living room and an open-plan kitchen/diner. The walled garden has no less than three sheds. thorntons-property.co.uk



NORTH YORKSHIRE £925,000
With wooden beams and inglenook fireplaces, grade II listed May Tree House in Scrin, near Knaresborough, oozes character. There are three bedrooms (one en suite) and two shower rooms. beadnallcopley.co.uk


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Friends and family. Clients and companions. In a job that's a people business, there will always be blurred lines and situations to be finessed.

Buying and selling property is not rocket science. The skill sets come down to common sense and a degree of emotional intelligence: know your area and what you're talking about, be courteous, turn up ten minutes early, possess market knowledge, have good relationships with fellow brokers and know how to structure and present a deal in the best way.

But, most important of all, be able to connect with people, understand what they want and make sure that you're a pleasant presence to be around.

Our office mantra, in block



'Twince when he says £10m – he'll be lucky to get half that'

suggesting impossibly high figures simply to gain an instruction. That approach only ends in disappointment, as it "burns" the property and undermines a sale.

There's an intensity to the relationship formed with clients: you're suddenly spending a lot of time with them at a pivotal moment in their lives. As a result I've had more than a few who've become close friends, though it's up to them to set the parameters on the relationship once the business of buying or selling is done.

I'm preparing a pitch for an older friend who might become a client. He's erudite, interesting and otherworldly. He's the sort of person to be found in his PJs at midday, engrossed in an Anthony Trollope biography. I do worry, though, about his expectations as to the value

of his property, inherited from a bachelor uncle. It's his sole asset, and the danger is that, like most people, he sees all the positive aspects of where he lives but none of the negatives.

I should know, as I live on the top-floor flat of a Victorian building. I see the ups: no neighbours upstairs, flooded with natural light, views on to the trees and the parakeets escaped from nearby London Zoo. But

friends who visit bemoan the hike up the stairs. I don't feel it, but if I put on my property hat I'm forced to admit that the resale value is greatly diminished by the lack of a lift.

My friend thinks his Chelsea house on the Kings Road is in turnkey condition, though it was last refurbished 35 years ago. He evangelises about the convenience of shops and the bus stop

outside his front door. "I see those glorious red double-deckers coming from my first-floor drawing room and can zip outside and hop on at a moment's notice. What could be better?"

While I agree with him that the property has its charms, and I'm determined to focus on the ups, I wince when he estimates the place must be worth at least £10 million. He'll be lucky to get half that.

My friendship hat will need to be taken off, and the supportive but realistic property one put on. Finesse is required.

*The Secret Agent is the author of *Highly Desirable: Tales of London's Super-Prime Property* (Headline £12.99). Buy from timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Discount for Times+ members*

THE TWO ROBS

Your questions on being a landlord and investing in property answered

DOES MY LETTING AGENCY HAVE TO SHOW ME INVOICES FOR REPAIRS?

Q I own a two-bedroom terraced property in Bolton, managed by a local letting agency. The agency uses its own contractors and deducts costs from my rental income without showing invoices because my contract apparently states it can administer repairs of up to £200 without my consent. It refuses to show me the bills, claiming this isn't done



for any landlord. It also attempts to repair old appliances even when I suggest replacing them.

I am considering switching, but my contract requires two months' notice coinciding with the end of the tenancy agreement. Is this standard practice? *Claire, Reading*

A While there's no legal requirement for letting agents to show original invoices, many do so as a matter of good practice, which allows landlords to verify the work done and ensures that the amount charged matches the tradesperson's fee. However, if your agent's terms of business don't specify that it will, it is not obliged to.

The £200 threshold for repairs without your consent is fairly standard in the industry, and is designed to prevent delays resolving minor issues. However, we'd expect to see invoices for any costs deducted from the rent – even if the value is below this threshold.

It's unusual that the agency is pushing for repairs when you are suggesting replacements. Often it's the other way around, as replacements

often save an agency time and hassle, even if they're less cost-effective.

Regarding changing agents, it's common for agencies to require you to keep paying its fee until the tenants it found move out. It's unusual (and impractical) to ask for two months' notice of this situation, though, because there may be occasions when the tenant is only required to give one month's notice, so you can't possibly know that far ahead that the tenancy is going to end. We'd suggest you query this with the agency.

Some agencies allow you to end the agreement and keep the tenants by paying a termination fee, but if your agent doesn't have this in its terms, you'll need to negotiate with it. Ultimately it depends on just how dissatisfied you are: you can attempt to bring the agreement to an end, but if it's only niggling you it may be easier to wait until the natural end of the tenancy.

I HAVE A BUSY JOB — SHOULD I TRY TO MANAGE A BUY-TO-LET MYSELF?

Q I'm a doctor interested in buy-to-let investing, but my job means I'm short on time to arrange viewings and answer calls

during the day. I know it's possible to have other people find properties and manage them for you, but other than the obvious trust issues, I worry about missing out on important knowledge by not doing things myself. Do you think I should do everything myself at least once before handing things over? *Abbad, Sheffield*

A We're big on the benefits of approaching property as an investment rather than getting into the weeds yourself, but you're right – most learning comes from doing, so there is a risk of missing out by outsourcing everything from the start.

Let's start by thinking about using somebody else to find investment opportunities for you. This is a lightly regulated area with a lot of subpar investments being heavily marketed – so you will still need to search locations, assess property and rental values and validate everything that they tell you.

If you're partnering with someone responsibly rather than blindly trusting them, you'll still have plenty of opportunities to sharpen your skills, even if it's not you

physically walking around properties with an estate agent. Nevertheless, you will of course learn more lessons from doing it yourself.

Once you've made a purchase, there is a lot to be said from managing the tenancy yourself initially – because by learning first-hand what it entails you'll be able to do a better job of selecting and collaborating with managing agents in future. However, for someone in your position, it may come down to a choice between bringing in outside help or not doing it at all.

So, if you do choose to outsource, read up in advance on what the lettings and management process involves and what legislation you need to comply with, so you can have better informed conversations with potential agents and keep an eye on their work. There are books available on this subject, and the government website has a comprehensive list of all your obligations.

Rob Dix and Rob Bence are the presenters of The Property Podcast

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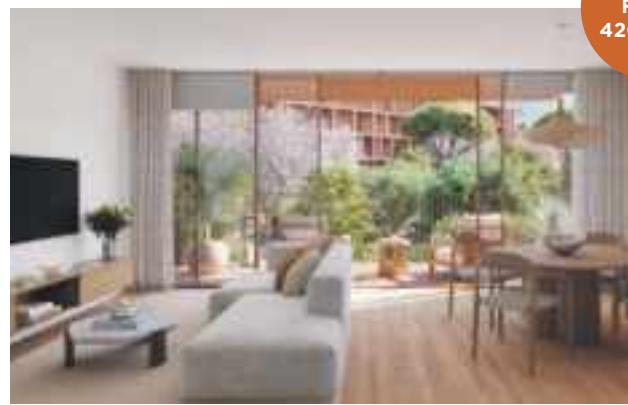
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Home

When Olivia Bowen was a little girl, her mum used to drive past a beautiful house in her Essex home town. "It was my dream house," Bowen reminisces. "Very grand with big gates, the kind of house I would want to live in for ever."

This was perhaps a far-fetched dream for a 22-year-old working in sales. But after she and Alex, who are now married, were crowned runners-up in the second season of ITV's hit dating show *Love Island* in 2016, everything changed.

The Bowens bought their first home for about £800,000 in Chelmsford, Essex, in 2017. Influencing was a less saturated market then it is today, and Bowen was making tens of thousands of pounds in brand partnerships. The couple also bagged their own TLC TV show, *Olivia and Alex Said Yes*, in 2018.

Then, when her childhood dream house came up for sale in 2020, they bought it. In the same year they also invested £128,000 in a one-bedroom property in Birmingham to renovate and rent out. This was followed in 2021 by a three-bedroom rental property for £175,000. Now, after four years as successful landlords, they are planning on purchasing four more two-bedroom properties in Manchester over the next two months to start growing their buy-to-let property portfolio. It is the interior designing that Bowen loves most and she is budgeting about £15,000 per house to ensure they are ready to rent out.

"I know *Love Island* won't last for ever. I've got my [influencing] career, which I absolutely adore, but I know things are going to change. Interior design has become



From left: Olivia Bowen with Winnie, her French bulldog; with her future husband, Alex, on Love Island; their home in Essex. Below: the dining room; kitchen/living area; bathroom



featured Ca' Pietra tiling in golds and greens and units from MyLife Bathrooms.

"I just want colour everywhere, different textures and patterns. Moving into a new-build makes it quite hard to visualise that but hopefully we'll get there. I started by working out what feeling I wanted in each room. Do I want to feel tranquil? Do I want to feel excited? Warm? Cold? Then I'll go out and look at colours and textures that evoke the feeling and look at my previous Pinterest boards, then collate it into a mood board," she says.

"When we moved in, the kitchen was the first room to be fully designed. I knew exactly what I wanted – a country oak, calm, tranquil and warm space. It looks exactly how I pictured it, which is quite hard to make happen."

It features a limestone-style floor made of porcelain by Ca' Pietra, oak shelves and an oak island designed by a local company, Rockwood Kitchens.

Separating the kitchen and dining area is a 160kg barn door that pulls along on a wheel mechanism to match the oak in the kitchen and wooden beams around the house.

The dining room hasn't been completed yet, except for the dining table, which is a bespoke marble centrepiece by Steve Bristow Furniture. The Bowens plan to use a teal colour scheme and add a built-in bookcase and bar.

"We really love our greens. Our main bedroom will have a nice olive green, which is such a calming colour, and we've also gone for a lot of pattern

clashing with geometrics, florals and stripes – it's starting to take shape.

"Sampling is also one of my biggest must-dos, especially in bathrooms with tiles, as well as items that you're going to spend a lot of money on like sofas. I went through a stage of never getting samples and nothing would ever match. Suppliers want you to have samples for free for a reason. Then you can collate a physical board to work from. For my bathrooms I would get all my tiles, towels and paints, and in our bedroom I would have cushion samples

– you start to really get a feel for it," Bowen explains.

"I'll start shopping and sourcing different items. If it's a quicker job I won't really look at budget, but if there's a lot to be done we'll plan a

budget and I'll start looking into suppliers and curate a board with the exact products and how much they are. I'll often buy the most important piece of furniture like a dining table or sofa first because they're investment pieces and something you should spend a bit of money on," she adds.

"You're put in a box when you go on *Love Island*, but I don't want that," Bowen says. "I want to invest in property and I want to be an interior designer, so that's what I'm going to do."

"My mum has always said to me, 'You will get where you want to go because you are formidable in that way. You won't stop, you have it in your mind and it will happen because you are constantly willing it into existence!'"

'Property was my way off Love Island'

something that I want to do with my life," Bowen, 30, says. "My dad always instilled the importance of property into me and I had that in the back of my mind. So when I fell in love with interior design, they [property and design] went together perfectly."

Bowen dipped her toe in all things interiors with their first home, but has since transformed her hobby into a passion. "I was absolutely awful [at interior design] when we bought our first home. I couldn't put colours together or furniture in a room," she says. "I made so many interior mistakes, so when I saw my dream house come up for sale in 2020, I knew it was the one because the house we were in really didn't feel right."

The couple sold up and upgraded to her childhood

After starring in the hit ITV dating show, Olivia Bowen escaped the neon lights of Casa Amor and used her passion for interior design to renovate her own dream villa. By Sasha Nugara

dream house for just over £1 million. "It was a complete renovation job and needed everything done to it. Covid hit and we were stuck in lockdown, but luckily labourers and tradesmen could still work," she says.

"I studied interior design during the pandemic so I could do it properly. It completely changed the way I managed the design of the house and it was the catalyst that started my absolute love of interiors and property."

She completed her online diploma in three months. "It was very practical and the teachers would mark your work and give feedback. It was really, really great," Bowen explains.

"The course taught me to look at a room as a feeling rather than how you want it to look. It's all through the colours and textures. You could see a nice grey sofa and like it, but if you want the room to feel cosy it's not going to give you what you want."

She then began to document their home-building progress on a new Instagram page, @thebowenhome, which now has 742,000 followers. She has posted more than 500 photos since 2020, including before-and-after pictures, as well as inspiration, links to the designers and items, and discount codes.

Four years and one baby boy later, Bowen began to get itchy feet and was ready to take the next step in her property journey: designing her own home. They sold their existing space for £500,000 more than they bought it for and bought a plot in Essex for £250,000 in June 2023.

"The house was finished in a year because it was already a quarter built when we took over, so it was a little easier for us than going from the ground up. We could have changed it more, but we liked how it was going. It took about ten months to complete the build," she says. Now Bowen is working her way through

the house, designing the interiors room by room. "I just wanted it to be a family hub of cosiness and cleanliness. I wanted loads of grainy wood, warm tones and wooden beams. My whole life has changed. Our old home was us as a couple and this house is really about being a family," she says.

She gets a lot of her inspiration from the hotels, gardens and countries she visited during her influencing career. The bathrooms were the first on her list and were designed and completed before they moved in two months ago. "The downstairs bathroom was a fun little project in an Italian theme with terracotta tiles. I limewashed the walls and we've added these hand-painted Italian style tiles."

Mood boards are one of Bowen's must-dos when designing so she can get a feel for a room and how the textures and patterns go together. Her original main en suite bathroom mood board

Home



of companies in the supply chain to two, rather than three, to reduce risk. Ian Doble, a homeowner near Swansea, used sliding doors by Internorm, which designs and manufactures systems in Austria, and uses approved UK installers. "Their customer service is exceptional and the windows are so easy to open."

To keep it simple, Smith's company, Minima, which has offices in London, Kent and Wiltshire, installs only one system – sliding windows and fixed glazing by Ultraline, which manufactures in the West Midlands and uses only two approved installers in the UK.

The key is choosing your installer carefully, Smith says. The biggest problems arise from windows that are measured and fitted incorrectly. Minima visits the site at least three times before installation: for an initial survey (to inspect ease of access and discuss with builders how to prepare the opening); a proper survey (measurements of the opening after the hole is made); and a preinstallation check to avoid surprises on the day of installation. "If the measurement is 10-20mm out, that could be £20,000 worth of doors that are useless," Smith says.

Many companies don't bother with a preinstallation check and do surveys before the opening has been cut, leaving a load of TBCs, causing drama on the day of installation. "The base that the doors rest on is often too low by say 30mm, which means lots of packers are needed underneath the doors, which then don't slide properly," Smith says. "They creak."

What precautions should homeowners take? Insist on inspecting one to three previous installations that the company has done, and not in a showroom. Try opening, closing and locking the windows. And ask the homeowners how detailed the survey process was and what paperwork they received.

Installers need to meet your builder in advance. "Make sure the window company and builders are 100 per cent clear on what is required for the perfect installation," Smith says. "You wouldn't believe how often this doesn't get done. The builder will have his own preferred supplier, because he usually gets a financial kickback from them. So often builders are miffed if the customer chooses their own supplier and washes his hands of them."

Ramus, meanwhile, gets miffed by bifolds, as they often twist and jam in the track; he won't use them. He only uses Ultraline/Minima and Maxlight glazing on his projects. He spent £60,000 on 50 sq m of Ultraline glazing for his own extension. "The mechanics are beautifully engineered. It's got eight wheels per pane. Cheaper ones might only have four wheels, and the lady of the house might struggle to open it. Whereas mine, they almost roll open."

Ramus says it's not worth scrimping and saving on windows, as cheap and cheerful frames are more likely to bend with big sheets of glass. It pays to splash out. "A big sheet of glass is going to give you views, light and ventilation, and if you want to open and close it a lot it's got to be easy to use and not break."

"People quite happily spend £100,000 on a kitchen, but what are you really getting for that much money that you couldn't get for £30,000 or £40,000? If you spend a bit more on glazing, you get better sightlines and useability. There's nothing worse than enduring a 12-month build and then having another two years chasing people because it doesn't work."

The next London Homebuilding & Renovating Show is September 27-29 at Excel. For free tickets go to homebuildingshow.co.uk/pr-the-times



14 clear-cut tips

1 Limit the number of panels that open to save money, reduce complications and minimise the number of unsightly tracks required.

2 To prevent overheating, use solar-coated or solar control glass. Triple glazing adds a lot of weight, which means it makes openings smaller – and it isn't significantly better at reducing heat indoors.

3 To reduce summer heat, consider external Venetian or roller blinds or awnings. Place blinds on the outside as internal blinds collect heat on the inside of the glass, acting like a radiator. Or build a 1.5m roof overhang.

4 The best glazing still loses five to eight times more energy than a solid wall. Consider framing selected views instead.

5 Aim for low U-values (the amount of energy that the system lets through). The ideal is between 0.6-0.8W/m²K. Standard glazing is about 1.4W/m²K.

6 If an installer gets multiple bad reviews online, that's a red flag.

7 Look up the installer on Companies House: it's a red flag if the director has folded or dissolved companies. You could end up losing your deposit.

8 Try to find an installer with in-house staff installers. Subcontractors can be transient, less motivated and less accountable.

9 Check if the installer has an insurance-backed warranty.

10 Check if the firm has a real showroom or office. Some may have a lovely website but operate out of a spare bedroom.

11 Choose the installer through word of mouth. Look at planning applications in your area that have been built, knock on the door and ask about their windows. The National Self Build and Renovation Centre has a network of self-builders you can ask.

12 The installer should only do the survey after the window openings are cut. Ask whether they also do a pre-install check.

13 Many trickle vents look ugly. Integrated ones look better (Velfac and Internorm offer these). Or get windows you can lock slightly ajar (2mm) for ventilation. Or install a mechanical ventilation with heat recovery system (MVHR) so you won't need trickle vents.

14 Consider self-cleaning glass – helpful for hard-to-reach areas.

When Ian Stewart built his ideal home for retirement, he had one priority: a water view. Stewart, 61, who ran his own photocopy software business, bought a plot of land at the mouth of the River Hamble, on the Hampshire coast near Southampton, and in 2021 built a five-bedroom house with an open-plan kitchen/living room overlooking the river through a wall of glass.

He didn't want bifold doors, as the multiple frames obstruct the view. So he paid £40,000 for four sliding panes that are each 3m wide, with slender aluminium frames by Ultraline that are only 20mm wide. "We went to the Homebuilding & Renovating show, where you can try out doors and talk to companies. We tested the weight of the sliding doors, because as we get older it's important that we're able to open and close them. We felt [the Ultraline] had the best sliding action; you can open them with one hand."

Unlike most building projects, installing the glazing went smoothly. "Minima, the installers, were meticulous. And the result has changed his life."

“They made the glass doors bigger than the track

It's lovely having all that glass. The thin frames mean you've got no distortion of the view, and on horrible days you see the weather coming in and rain lashing the window, but you feel snug inside, there's no leaks or whistling wind. And in the summer you just open it all up, so it feels like you're sitting outside."

Not everyone has been so lucky with their glazing. When John Ayris and Anne Spratling renovated an 1830s farmhouse in Kent, they installed a 9m span of glass with sliding doors, paying £120,000 to an English company, rather than splashing out £250,000 on a high-end German one. But the English company's installation caused two years of delays, and the company went bust, leaving them high and dry. "They didn't measure properly and made the doors bigger than the track," Spratling says. "The doors weren't able to link tightly together so weren't draught-proof. It was difficult to slide the doors along."

Ask a homeowner what the biggest challenge of their renovation was and they'll inevitably say the windows – the big sliding ones and large walls of glazing that are now so popular. But it's not as

WHO THE ARCHITECTS RECOMMEND

We surveyed architects for their preferred window systems. These brands came up most frequently:

● Sky-Frame

recommended by Eldridge London, Finkernagel Ross, Gregory Phillips, Schueco

● Sophie Bates, R2 Studio, L&C, Square Feet

● Cantifix Alison Brooks, Loy & Co

● Maxlight

Paul Archer, AR Design Studio, Will Gamble

● Ultraline

Philip Wadge, Bindloss Dawes, Tidal

● Velfac MH

Workshop, Tonkin Liu



Far left: Anne Spratling and John Ayris. Above: Ian and Kate Stewart; their doors, inset. Left: glass by Cantifix in a home by Alison Brooks Architects. Above right: Maxlight doors in an extension by Square Feet Architects

simple as just paying more for German windows, according to the architect Andy Ramus, head of AR Design Studio in Winchester. "The big problem with the industry is there's so many people involved in the supply chain." There are designers who create window systems, as well as manufacturers and installers. "Along that journey all kinds of things can go wrong," Ramus says.

"You can get a good German system, which can be shipped out to 500 different manufacturers, some of which are excellent, some of which are poor," explains Dan Smith, the founder of Minima Windows. "And then you can get 500 different installers, some good, some terrible, buying that product. So you can have Mr and Mrs Jones who bought the same German door as Mr and Mrs Smith. One has an amazing experience, one has a terrible experience."

The ideal scenario would be to use a

company that designs, manufactures and installs its own systems, says Smith, but this is rare – Maxlight, a British company, is one. He also cites Sky-Frame, a

premium brand that is designed and manufactured in Switzerland, and uses a mix of its own installers and approved third-party installers.

If you can't find an all-in-one outfit, Smith recommends reducing the number

The topic of driveways can be terribly mundane but Emily Murray, the creative force behind the Instagram account @pinkhouseliving, proves otherwise. Her transformation of the drive in front of her southeast London semi is a triumph – she turned the “big mess” with “ugly walls and crazy paving” into a chic, useful space with aplomb.

The interiors influencer’s classic block paving was looking somewhat decrepit and the layout of the old driveway – inherited from the previous owners when the Murrays bought the property in 2017 – didn’t make sense. “There wasn’t enough room for anything – a ridiculous situation because, actually, it’s quite a lot of space, especially for London,” she says.

“It was completely useless as a driveway. The garage was created to fit an old sports car and the driveway itself was so narrow that you wouldn’t be able to get out of your car without banging your doors. And there was nowhere to put the bins other than in the driveway.”

Her original vision included plans to render the whole house and paint it pink

Driveway to heaven

The interiors influencer Emily Murray transformed her drive with pink gravel and EV charging points. *Victoria Brzezinski* meets her

(naturally). “My husband, Euan, used his power of veto on that so that didn’t happen,” Emily admits. A concession was to paint the windowsills in her own bespoke bubblegum shade, aptly named Pink House Pink, from Mylands.

The couple put their heads together with the landscape gardening company Bes Landscapes to figure out the best way to rejig the front garden. “We needed somewhere to put the bins and we wanted to keep certain things like the wooden platform [for a table and

chairs in good weather] that Euan had made,” Emily says.

A decision was made to move the old wall (removing the stone topping and opting for a simple plaster wall) as well as shifting the stairs backwards and rebuilding them at an angle to enlarge the driveway. However, the process uncovered another problem: the gas and electric pipes along one wall.

“Instead of going to the gas board and waiting forever, we got it done privately for a couple of hundred pounds,” Emily says. “They came within

two weeks and rerouted the pipes and we were able to make the driveway as wide as it is.” Emily also had an EV charging point and motion-triggered solar lights installed.

The least sexy but perhaps the most useful part of the new design includes a designated area for the multiple bins (general, food waste, garden waste and recycling) in front of the stairs to the right of the house, as well as planters and a climbing hydrangea over the garage door for verdant vibes.

Emily chose the colour Garden from Little Greene for the stairs and garage door. “It was a much brighter green than I was expecting but it’s so fun and fresh. I knew it was going to look good with the pink because you can’t go wrong with that combination.”

The Murrays’ project timing couldn’t have been better. In their London borough, Lewisham, the council brought in parking measures in October 2023 as part of its Sustainable Streets initiative, limiting free parking on certain streets. “That means a driveway becomes even more worthwhile,” Emily says.

Maximising kerb appeal can also result in a hefty uplift to your house price. Estimates will vary, but expect to pay £10,000 to £15,000 for a project similar to the Murrays’.

Bes Landscapes recommends stabilised gravel as the “best, easiest and cheapest option” for the driveway surface – Emily picked a blush-pink variation. “The gravel has been done using a gravel stabilising grid. This means the gravel has a soft look while having structure underneath,” Bes Landscapes’ founder, Besmir Mustafa, says.

He recommends the website cedstonelondon.co.uk as a good supplier of gravel and grids. They also fitted a lockable security bollard, which Emily rates highly: “One, it stops people stealing your car. Second, when you’re not using the driveway it means people can’t park in it.”

David Hadley, the owner of Creative Gardens & Driveways, a specialist firm based in Cheshire, is reporting an increase in clients opting for

BEFORE



AFTER



EDINBURGH,
WHITEHILL HOUSE



This famous Grade A listed former stable block at Whitehill Country Estate attached to a large country house designed by William Burn circa 1840 has been sensitively restored to create 8 unique large 1- and 2-bedroom houses, located on a private estate with access to a private golf club and tennis court.



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eco-friendly driveways. “The UK’s love affair with asphalt and block paving is waning,” he says. “Consumers are increasingly recognising the irony of parking their electric cars on driveways that are environmental disasters. We now have options that are permeable, durable, cost-effective and beautiful.”

Hadley estimates rough costs per sq m (for surfacing only, including labour costs) based on 100 sq m (about the size of a three-car drive) for four different types of driveway material. He ranks each option in order of least to most sustainable.

In fourth place is resin-bound aggregate, which will set you back about £120 a sq m. Pros include good drainage, but Hadley says it has a limited lifespan and generates a large amount of non-recyclable plastic waste.

He ranks tarmac third, averaging £60 to £75 a sq m, while block paving is second,



at about £120 to £180 a sq m. While both tarmac and block-paved driveways are long-lasting options, Hadley warns: “There are high CO2 emissions in transportation and production.”

Hadley recommends stabilised gravel as the best solution: a long-lasting option that offers great drainage and can easily be altered and repaired. At £40 to £50 a sq m, it’s also the most pocket-friendly.

He suggests Nidagravel UK, which has gravel grids that are completely rainwater-permeable to reduce run-off and flash flooding. Where possible, Creative Gardens & Driveways will also use reclaimed stone for driveways. “Even better if it’s already on a property as there is no carbon footprint for extraction or transportation. We typically use a combination of natural stone and gravel to create attractive driveways that cause less environmental impact.”



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Every day's a spa day

How to pamper yourself at home like Gwyneth

Paltrow. By Tara Loader-Wilkinson

Want inspiration for an enviable home spa? Look no further than the queen of self-care, the Goop founder Gwyneth Paltrow. At her home in Montecito, California, she has a luxurious sauna, hot tub, steam room and plunge pool.

Her wellness ritual starts with a dry body brush followed by a leave-in hair treatment prior to a sauna. "I love a good sauna schitz," she says, adding that her husband, Brad Falchuk, is an "obsessive" cold plunger. "I come in here every day and whenever I'm here I'm like, pinch me – I cannot believe this is our house and we live here."

Paltrow isn't alone in wanting to create a sumptuous spa environment at home.

Interior designers are reporting an increase in demand for home spas and bathrooms built for pampering, as clients seek to incorporate wellness and relaxation into their lifestyle and prioritise mental health. The British interior designer Katharine Pooley, who has worked on some seriously high-end homes, believes that people with busy schedules have become better at looking after themselves.

"Home is where you're meant to feel most comfortable," she says. "There is now more interest in spas or treatment rooms at home, whether that's a massage

room, infrared sauna, eucalyptus steam room or ice-cold plunge pool. A spa at home can be a treasured sanctuary."

Many of her clients want to have a spa experience at home that transports them to a completely different world, she adds. Often home spas are located in a gloomy basement or in a separate building.

Pooley's recent commissions have included spas in the English countryside, Sardinia and Cannes, and featured

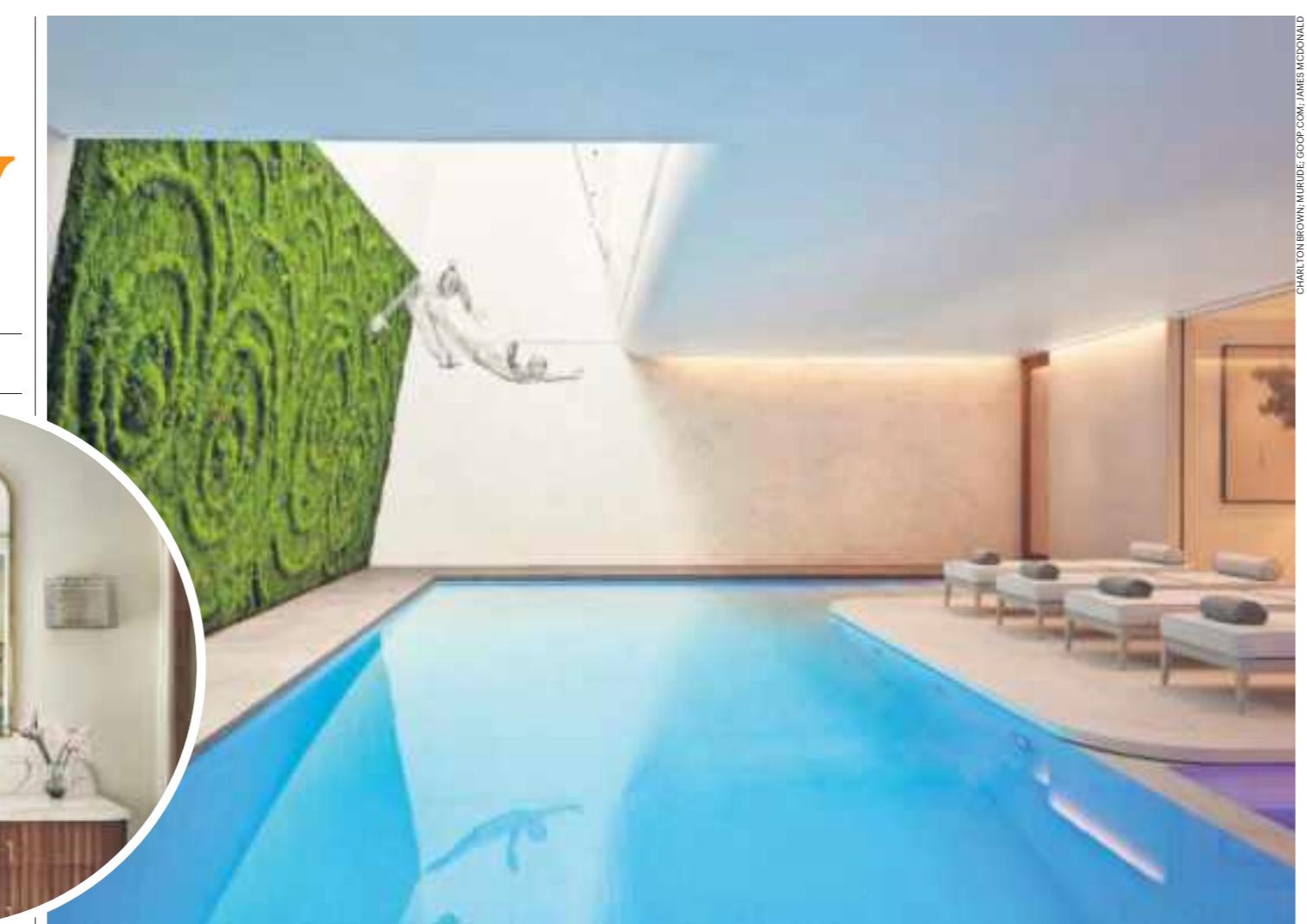
scented rain showers, walls and bathing areas made from rose quartz, travertine and agate, and the latest technology. For the sleekest saunas and spas she often uses the Italian brand Effe. For outdoor showers she loves Ama, while for the most zen pools she turns to the British specialist Aqua Platinum.

In one project, Pooley installed an indoor pool framed by a living moss wall bathed in natural light, and featuring a sculpture of two steel mesh diving figures by Nikki Taylor, a British sculptor. Another client asked her to recreate the sculptural heated marble loungers in the luxury spa at the Corinthia London hotel.



“
We wanted to create a home spa like ones we'd been to in Asia

Above: Blake Architects' vanity unit with fluted oak, a marble top and brass tassel-style handles. **Above right:** Katharine Pooley's indoor pool design with a living moss wall and two steel mesh diving figures by Nikki Taylor



She adds that ice baths and plunge pools have been popular requests from clients recently, often to be installed outside, "wherever the view is most beautiful". But to enjoy a home spa experience, you don't necessarily need a spa, although it is nice to have. A bathroom, no matter how small, can be transformed into your own sanctuary. So says Chris Pask, director at Charlton Brown, a London-based architecture and interiors company.

Pask advises his clients to use "minimal layering" to create a spa-like environment. "You want the space to be relaxing and not overcrowded, so when layering with materials, textures and colours, these have to be subtle

contrasts," he says. For instance, at Soutar House, an early-1900s family home in Hampstead Garden Suburb, north London, the bathroom was created in stone and off-white tones to create a calm atmosphere, along with natural materials such as a tadelakt (polished plaster) finish on the walls. "Add in organic sculptures, vases, pots and leafy plants to give an outside-inside feel to the space, grounding the room," Pask says.

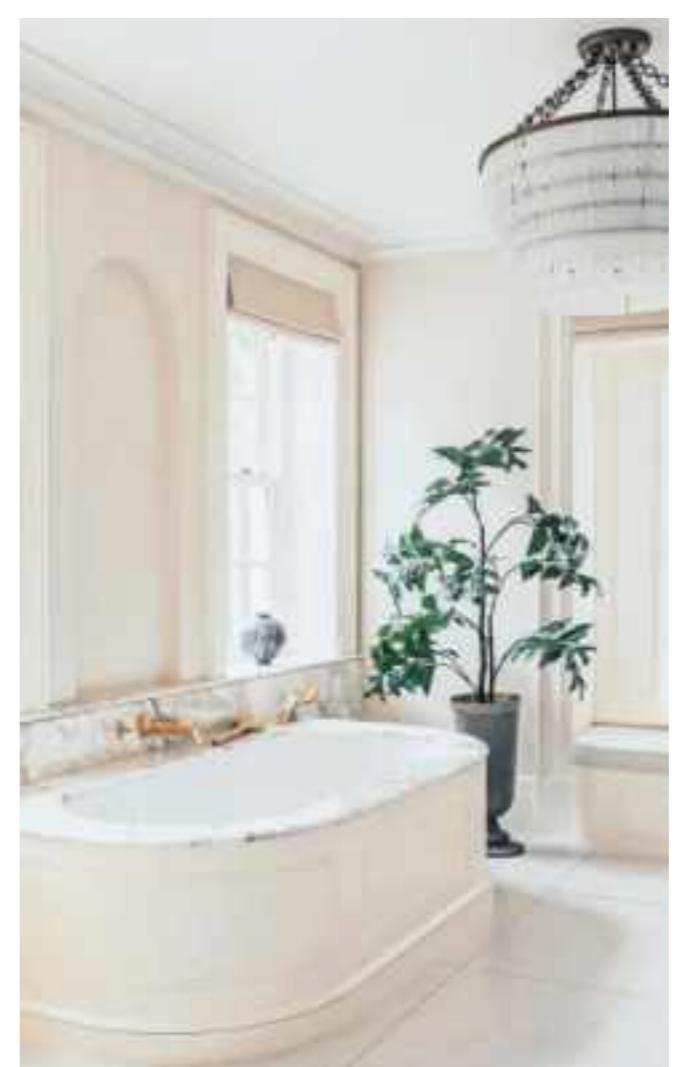
The bathroom is where I go to for some me time
When Mel Gilmore designed the en suite bathroom in her new home, she had a blank canvas – a prospect at once exciting

and intimidating. She and her husband had bought the Victorian house in Wandsworth, southwest London, while they were living in Asia, so had time to contemplate the perfect spa bathroom.

"The bathroom is where I retreat to once the kids are in bed, to enjoy some me time," says Gilmore, who has two young sons and works for a non-profit organisation. "We've stayed at many luxury spa hotels in Asia with beautiful bathrooms. We wanted to recreate that sense of pampering every time you walk in."

The priority was having supersonic water pressure, not easy with Victorian plumbing. So Gilmore installed an extra boiler as well as a water pressure booster

Right: Soutar House's stone and off-white bathroom with vases and plants. **Far right:** Mel Gilmore's marble shower. **Below:** the Goop founder Gwyneth Paltrow in her home spa



to create a hydrotherapy experience. To achieve the designer look, she opted for palissandro marble in the shower, book-matched by an expert – book-matched marble is where the slabs are cut so the adjoining pieces perfectly mirror each other, like an open book. "It showcases the true beauty of the veins of the marble," she says.

The Thassos marble tiles from Greece were laid to a design by Pernille Lind, a Danish-Thai interior designer. Gilmore's husband spotted them on the floor of a luxury hotel he was staying at in Copenhagen – Hotel Sanders, which has won several awards for its design.

The couple had originally wanted a vintage vanity unit, but couldn't find one

to fit the space, so Blake Architects made a custom vintage-style one from bespoke fluted oak, with a marble top, complete with brass tassel-style handles. The lights and mirror are vintage, while the shower head and taps are antique reproductions by the Water Monopoly.

Gilmore spent hours researching the perfect bathtubs too. She eventually opted for diamond-patterned ones made from recycled fibres by Cologne & Cotton. Her bathroom ritual is sacred – after locking the door, she slips into her Babington House spa robe, lights a Jo Malone candle and enjoys a soothing shower using Messiah and Eve's vegan bodycare range.

"It is my peaceful sanctuary," she says.

OBJECT LESSONS: WHY WE MUST KEEP CRAFTS ALIVE

From Sussex trug-making to weaving in Wales, Sally Coulthard celebrates Britain's ancient skills

I've just spent a very happy year or so writing my new book. Called *A Brief History of the Countryside in 100 Objects* it, perhaps unsurprisingly, tells the story of our green and pleasant land through artefacts our ancestors left behind. Some are gruesome, such as village stocks and bollock daggers (knives with genitalia-shaped hilts, before you ask). Others are fabulously superstitious –

the dried cat shoved up a chimney springs to mind. Many are touching: a toy cockerel found in a Roman child's grave, or the perfectly preserved leather shoes of a sacrificed man.

For all their diversity, however, most of the hundred objects share a common thread. They were all beautifully made. Whether the maker was a woodworker, a cooper, a potter or a bladesmith, the sense of craftsmanship shines through

the pages. The time and care taken to fashion the 12,000-year-old headdress found at Star Carr in North Yorkshire sets the tone for subsequent centuries. I discovered neolithic jewellery carved from the bones of Orkney's creatures, elegantly patterned beakers from the Bronze Age, and "magical" Anglo-Saxon buckets hewn from poisonous yew.

Using crafted objects creates a dialogue between you, a maker and history. Take Leach Pottery in Cornwall, for example. I have three of its stoneware bowls in the kitchen – gloriously simple clay dishes with a glazed interior. They're immensely useful, and wonderful to handle, and a 15th-century potter would feel completely at home talking through the craft process with one of the studio's present makers.

I feel the same way about practically everything made by Selwyn House, a small workshop in rural

Northamptonshire that creates wooden tableware from British-grown timbers. The history of woodcarving in this country is astonishingly deep-rooted – the oldest object found to date is the Clacton Spear, a 400,000-year-old tapered weapon fashioned not by a modern human but one of our ancient forebears, *Homo heidelbergensis*. And, while my little brown oak spoon wasn't made with hunting in mind, handcarving an object that fits perfectly in the hand is part of the same story.

Through history, makers have used materials judiciously. Seeing potential is one of a craftsman's greatest talents. I own a number of chopping boards made by the Yorkshire-based woodworker Mark Bennett. Each is unique and carved



1 Beeswax candles, £12 for two, hareandwide.co.uk

2 Blue Mary Rose bottle, £19, themerchantventurers.co.uk

3 Sycamore boards, from £50, northhomewares.co.uk

4 Oak spoon by Selwyn House, £26, lewesmapstore.co.uk

5 Rush bread basket by Felicity Irons, £72, davidmellordesign.com

6 Prepping bowl set, £72, leachpottery.com

from English timber rescued from local estates such as Castle Howard. Sycamore, ash, oak, elm – his valuable materials read like a compendium of the nation's native woodlands.

Sparing use of resources

also defines Welsh stick chairs, like the dazzling examples made by "Dave the Bodger". A word now misused to mean something hashed together, "bodgers" were traditional crafters who lived in woodland and used unseasoned or "green" timber to make chairs using a pole lathe. Graceful, lightweight but robust, these rustic seats have become icons of rural design.

In fact, the imperfections in crafted objects are often the things that give them their humanity. I was gifted a little hand-blown Mary Rose glass bottle from the Staffordshire-based historical glassmaker Merchant Venturers by a friend with a passion for re-enactment. It's gorgeously eccentric and wobbly, and reminds me of the Cuddesdon bowl, one of the Anglo-Saxon riches in my book. My little blue bottle is not quite so grand, perhaps,

but a treasure to me.

Buying crafted items also keeps those skills from disappearing. It occurred to me that many trades only survive through people continuing to engage with the craft. Melin Tregwynt keeps the skills of Welsh traditional weavers alive, for example, producing baby-soft woolen fabrics in a mill that's been clacking away for nearly two centuries.

Artisans such as Charlie Groves or The Truggeries are keeping trug-making a viable enterprise in Sussex, an area rich in sweet chestnut and cricket-beat willow, both essential trug components. Choosing Sussex trugs not only keeps their expertise alive but also helps to maintain coppiced woodlands, which support a range of flora and fauna.

A Brief History of the Countryside in 100 Objects by Sally Coulthard (HarperCollins £22). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount for Times+ members

TIME AND SPACE RICHARD HAMMOND

'I live in a ridiculous little castle'

The presenter on his 15th-century home and what Jeremy Clarkson is like as a guest

I have ended up travelling the world with my television work, but I always feel like there's a piece of elastic attached to me as I leave home. After 25 years of living out of a suitcase, I've come home and that's where my head is. I've sat in rainforests, on glaciers, in deserts, and I don't ever fully go where I'm going. Part of me is always still at home.

What is your home like?

Our house, which is ridiculous, is called a castle in Herefordshire and dates back to 1490. I'll never forget taking the girls, who were eight and five at the time, to look at it 15 years ago. We drove past the little moat outside with the turrets round and we said, "Would you like to live in it?" They went berserk at the idea of living in a little castle.

How does it feel to be living in your own castle?

It's not grand and it isn't really a castle. It's just a house, with some bits of castle nailed to it. It's not a particularly massive house.

How many acres of land do you have?

Thirty acres. We grow hay on it for the horses and there's an area we call the Dingle, a lovely woodland area, which we've extensively reworked. We planted it

with trees about 12 years ago. We've got three dogs and two cats. At one point, we were up to seven dogs and six cats. We also have three horses, a miniature donkey and three goats.

How different is your home now from the one you grew up in?

I grew up in Birmingham, in suburban Shirley. I drove past my childhood home a few years ago and thought, "If the girls are being spoilt brats – which they never are – I'll show them." When I got there, the place was absolutely lovely – charming suburbia – with cherry trees and tarmac drives flecked with white bits. It wasn't what I'd built it up to be in my head.

Tell us about your man cave, which you call a clubhouse ...

I grew up as the eldest of three sons, so I lived in a very male-dominated household. Now I have my wife, Mindy, and two daughters, who are 23 and 21.

I think there are about 27 motorcycles, dating from the 1920s to today. And cars? I genuinely don't know, but I'm guessing around 20, including a Jaguar XK 120, a Jensen Interceptor, a '62 E-type roadster coupe, which are all awaiting restoration.

I've got a poster featuring the dragster that I crashed in [while filming *Top Gear* in 2006], and a Lego model of



From top:
Richard Hammond; his castle home in Herefordshire; with his wife, Mindy, and their daughters, Isabella and Willow, in 2006

the dragster that Lego gave me. I've got the original crash helmet I wore. Over the table upstairs, where I build Airfix models, I've got the tattered shirt that I was wearing. It's on a hanger on a nail on the wall. It's not blood-soaked but it is ripped to bits because the emergency services cut it off me. I look at it sometimes and think, "Phew, that was lucky."

What sort of a house guest is Jeremy Clarkson?

He's actually a very good guest. Eee's well brought up, ain't he? I do have some colourful friends staying if we have some big gathering here. It was my youngest daughter's 21st last weekend so the whole place took some recovering from that event.

Any house rules?

When the girls were younger, they could swear with us and we could with them. I realised early on that if I want them to be themselves with me, and to be honest with me and to stay connected with us, they need to see the real us. As a result, I've never seen them inappropriately dropping the F-bomb, because the sting was taken out of it.

Interview by Nick McGrath

Richard Hammond's Workshop streams from tomorrow on discovery+

THE LOFT EXTENSION FROM HELL HAS RUINED MY BATHROOM

We just had a loft extension fitted in our home in Wimbledon and the bathroom fitter has destroyed our bathroom. On the surface everything looks beautiful but all of the plumbing is wrong, the shower floods when used and bubbles when the bath is drained, as does the toilet with an intermittent dreadful smell. The freestanding taps were fitted so that the stands move back and forth when the taps are touched and the bedroom radiators have been fitted to come on with the hot water, not the central heating.

I can't even bear to go into the loft. The building company has put exorbitant charges on our final bill, such as £750 for trims

added to ready-built stairs. Is there anything you can do to help to prevent us having to rip out what would have been a beautiful bathroom?

Claire Brayford

I'm sorry to hear that your dream bathroom has ended up being a nightmare. Your issue lies against the person that you contracted to fit the bathroom ("the Contractor"). This could be the builder, who might have subcontracted the bathroom work as part of a larger project, or the specialist bathroom fitter if you had a separate contract with them. Besides the express terms of

your contract, according to section 49 of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 the work should be carried out with reasonable care and skill to the standard of a competent professional in that trade.

The issues you have described sound like the work may not have been carried out with said reasonable care and skill, so you may have a claim for breach of contract. If you think that is the case (and it certainly seems to be, based on the details you have given), the first thing you should do is give the Contractor an opportunity to fix the work done on your bathroom. As per section 55

of the Act, they should redo the job within a reasonable time frame, at no extra cost and without significant inconvenience to you.

If the issue is still not resolved, under section 56 of the Act you can then ask for a reduction in price. The Contractor would also be responsible for any additional costs or losses you've had because of the problem with the work.

As far as the additional charges on the final bill are concerned, the builder is restricted to charging either a fixed price, if one was agreed in advance, and if not, a reasonable price for the service carried out.

You may also be able to get independent legal advice/representation including the costs of getting an expert report, if legal expenses insurance ("LEI") is included on any insurance policies you

have. It's worth checking with your home insurance company to see whether that is the case.

If you happened to have paid for the works by credit card, you would have extra protection under the Consumer Credit Act 1974, as the credit card company could be held responsible for the issue as well.

Section 75 is a great recourse in such cases and as long as you paid over £100 on the credit card, the Consumer Credit Act means that the whole amount will be covered.

Finally, we'd always recommend using reputable traders for renovation work. You can use sites such as Which? Trusted Traders to find businesses that have been independently assessed and approved. Rebecca Turnbull-Simpson, solicitor, Which?

Readers' clinic

I can't get rid of the orange-red chilli/bolognese stains on my Tupperware. Is there anything that works?

Michelle W

Steradent removes stains from all cooking utensils and plastic.

Lis Mercer Banks, Wiltshire

Put it in the dishwasher. This removes all tomato type stains.

Mark Pearson, Windermere

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Mrs S Heslop

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